

Guest Editorial

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We must close the achievement gap

By State Superintendent Tony Evers and Mequon-Thiensville District Administrator Demond Means

We joined together in April to work on the most important issue facing education in our state: closing the achievement gap.

While Wisconsin has had some outstanding academic results over the years — overall high achievement on the ACT college admissions exams and among the top states for graduation rates — we also have some of the worst achievement gaps in the nation for students of color. All achievement gaps are troubling, and we have gaps for economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners as well. But our deepest concern, and the focus of the State Superintendent’s Task Force on Wisconsin’s Achievement Gap, is on the state’s race-based achievement gaps.

We brought together 12 teachers and five principals from public, choice, and charter schools throughout the state to work on the achievement gap issue. These successful educators were from schools where the achievement gap between students of color and white students was closing, and the achievement of students of color was growing at a higher rate than the state average. They found common ground in the hard work they do every day to help all children reach their full potential. Many of their recommendations revolve around the importance of relationships: between educator and student, and among adults, as well as honoring cultures that are not our own.

The strategies and best practices advanced in the “Promoting Excellence for All” report and website are from educators, for educators. The strategies span four broad categories: effective instruction, student-teacher relationships, family and community engagement, and school and instructional leadership. The four focus areas are based on school improvement and achievement gap research from the past two decades so they may be recognizable to those following this research. None-the-less, these strategies are powerful tools for individual educators, and every school in the state can benefit from using one or more of these ideas. From the Angel List and Focused Events to Cultural Competency and Relationship Building, they are all tried and tested. They work. They make a difference for students.

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As educators, we made a commitment when we first walked into our classrooms. That commitment was to reach every kid. We didn't make a commitment to reach 75 percent of the students. The achievement gap has major implications, not only for individual students, but also for our state's social and economic future. Simply, the achievement gap is morally reprehensible. If we truly believe in the principle of equality and opportunity, our children deserve that chance through education. We call for accountability. Yet, an overall achievement level isn't truly accountable when there are gaps for certain student groups. And, if we want to advance Wisconsin's economy, we need all of our students to graduate college and career ready. When one in four Hispanic and American Indian students drop out, and one in three African-American students drop out from our schools each year, that's way too much lost opportunity. We need all students to succeed.

We know that alone, the strategies the task force is advancing will not close the gaps. These are changes of heart and mind and will be the most difficult to navigate. But, if we follow our moral compasses, we can change. We have confidence that the Promoting Excellence for All website, and learning modules that will follow, will tap into the core nature of educators. They entered the field to work with children because they care.

But addressing disparities will require community leaders and citizens to explore ways to improve the lives of all residents. And we acknowledge that our state's educators will need the assistance of legislators, the business community, and citizens to effectively implement the strategies recommended in the task force report.

We know that families want the best for their children. The task force's work reinforced that one of the most effective reforms for schools is to focus on engaging parents. We are also hopeful the task force report will stimulate a sustained dialogue on how communities can rally together to close the gap. Closing the achievement gap is a work of love. Only together can we solve this problem. The children of our state are counting on us.

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NOTE: This editorial can be found electronically at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/files/eis/pdf/dpinr2014_100.pdf. The Promoting Excellence for All website can be found at <http://statesupt.dpi.wi.gov/excforall>. The introductory video, *Closing Achievement Gaps: Strategies for Promoting Excellence for All in Wisconsin*, is at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YH-VvjNsL2Q>

Background

Dr. Tony Evers was elected Wisconsin state superintendent of public instruction in April 2009 and re-elected in 2013. He began his career in 1976 as an educator in Tomah and has served Wisconsin students, parents, and citizens as an education leader at every level: principal, school district administrator, CESA administrator, and deputy state superintendent.

Dr. Demond Means, superintendent of the Mequon-Thiensville School District, has nearly two decades of administrative experience. His background includes work as a social studies teacher, coach, and adviser. He served as chair of *Promoting Excellence for All: The State Superintendent's Task Force on Wisconsin's Achievement Gap*.